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SUBJECT: PRESS FREEDOM UPDATE -- DECEMBER 17

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

11. (C) Summary. In the period leading up to and immediately following President Chavez' failed efforts to reform the 1999 constitution, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) continued to systematically harass and threaten independent media outlets and restrict freedom of expression. The opposition-oriented regional newspaper "El Correo del Caroni" claimed it had to cease printing on December 12 because the Commission for the Allocation of Foreign Exchange (Cadivi) failed to release dollars to import newsprint. The operations of other leading regional dailies are also endangered for similar reasons. Cadivi's lack of payment is likely due to its growing inability to meet the high demand for dollars. State security officials beat several journalists as they attempted to cover anti-reform student-led demonstrations during the campaign period. Three radio stations in Bolivar state were closed after the station's workers criticized the Venezuelan president's reform package. In a November 20 report, the Inter-American Press Society (SIP) expressed concern over the "deteriorating" state of freedom of expression in Venezuela. We expect the BRV to implement new measures to increase its control over the free press, mostly in retaliation for their campaign against Chavez' failed constitutional referendum. End Summary.

"El Correo" Temporarily Ceases Printing

12. (C) Opposition-oriented newspaper "El Correo del Caroni" of Bolivar state ceased printing on December 12 for four days claiming the Commission for the Allocation of Foreign Exchange (Cadivi) failed to authorize the release of dollars to buy the newsprint it imports from the Chilean company Dipalca. David Natera, "El Correo's" editor and president of the Venezuelan Press Association, referred to the measure as another attempt by the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) to silence the few remaining independent media outlets. Natera told Press Specialist on December 11 that he has been waiting for several months for Cadivi to disburse the funds.

13. (SBU) After "El Correo" announced that it would cease printing, the Finance Minister Rodrigo Cabezas and Communications Minister William Lara released a statement dismissing Natera's accusations that the disbursement delay was politically motivated. According to the statement, the president of Cadivi, Manuel Barroso, and Dagoberto Romer, president of Dipalca, met December 12 to discuss the allocation of funds. On December 13, "El Correo's" on-line edition reported that Dipalca informed the newspaper that it was to receive Cadivi funds and would be able to import more

paper in the coming days. "El Correo" resumed its normal operations on December 16.

¶4. (C) In late November, the Venezuelan Press Association released a statement criticizing the BRV for its "extreme" tardiness in releasing dollars meant for the importation of printing materials. Natera said that Cadivi delays have also affected other regional dailies which rely on Dipalca's services, including "El Impulso" and "El Carabobeno." Other popular dailies like "La Verdad" and "El Regional de Zulia" report that they have less than a thirty-day supply of paper and are unsure when Cadivi will release their funds. Media watchdogs the Inter-American Press Association (SIP) and Reporters Without Borders issued press statements expressing concern over "El Correo's" predicament and that of other affected dailies. Both organizations urged the BRV to refrain from using monetary control measures to penalize media outlets critical of the government. Cadivi claims it has authorized the release of more than USD 82 million for paper since January, representing an increase of 8 percent over last year's figures. These figures, however, fail to note how many dollars were requested and to which media the funds were allocated.

PM Officers Severely Beat Journalists

¶5. (SBU) Municipal Police (PM) officers severely beat several journalists on December 6 as they attempted to cover an altercation between motorcyclists and PM officials on a busy Caracas highway. Gangs of motorcyclists set fire to a police tow truck, reportedly to protest a patrol vehicle's collision with one of their own members. The officers initially attacked journalist Larry Arvelo of opposition-oriented cable network Globovision after he refused to stop filming the incident. Arvelo, who arrived on a motorcycle, told the local media that police officers beat him even after he showed them his press credentials. PM officials argued that Arvelo arrived on an unmarked motorcycle and did not produce proper identification. Arvelo alleges he was subsequently placed in a police vehicle and beaten further. He was temporarily detained and then released at the entrance of a Caracas Metro station. Arvelo admitted himself to a hospital following the incident.

¶6. (SBU) PM officers also attacked four other journalists, two from Televen and two from Globovision, for attempting to cover the same incident. Globovision's lawyer's have since called on the BRV to investigate the matter and to suspend the PM officers in question while the investigation is ongoing. They also urged the BRV to comply with an Inter-American Human Rights Commission measure of protection in favor of the network's employees.

Restrictions on Text Messaging

¶7. (C) The Telecommunications Regulatory Agency (CONATEL) announced December 10 a proposal to hold cell phone companies responsible for the content of messages transmitted through their networks. If passed, cell phone networks would be required to alter customer contracts to include language that prohibits text messages that "incite crime or violence." While CONATEL did not elaborate on what prompted the proposal, it is likely that the measure is meant to crack down on those sectors that used text messaging, and other innovative methods of communication, to disseminate anti-constitutional reform messages during the referendum campaign.

Press Union Denounces Aggressions

¶8. (SBU) The National Press Worker's Union (SNTP) released a report November 11 documenting physical attacks against

journalists at the hands of state security forces and pro-government sympathizers during the referendum campaign. The majority of the documented incidents occurred when journalists attempted to cover opposition-oriented student-led protests. Some of the cases mentioned in the report include:

-- A journalist affiliated with Radio Caracas Television International and another from the daily newspaper "Cambio de Siglo" were attacked by state security officials on November 9 when they tried to cover a student demonstration in the university town of Merida.

-- On November 8, two journalists from the newspaper "Los Llanos" were assaulted by members of a Special Operations Unit of the Barinas police when they attempted to cover student-led demonstrations in that state.

-- Three journalists suffered injuries at the Central University of Venezuela's campus on November 7 during disturbances between pro-government groups and opposition-oriented students. Two graphic artists affiliated with the daily newspaper "2001" were injured as was a journalist from the regional daily "El Carabobeno."

-- On November 7, a reporter from "El Informador" was physically assaulted by unknown persons when he attempted to cover an anti-reform student demonstration in Barquisimeto, Lara state. He was stripped of his personal belongings and his technical equipment and threatened at gun point.

Radio Stations Closed

¶9. (SBU) Government officials in Bolivar state closed three radio stations between late October and early November. The national media reported that government officials entered Radio FLASH 93.1's offices and harassed workers on November 1 for criticizing President Chavez' constitutional reform project. The officials later cut off the station's power connection. According to press reports, Bolivar state officials took similar actions against SOL 110.3 and Horizonte 97.7 days earlier.

SIP

¶10. (SBU) The Inter-American Press Association (SIP) released a critical report on the state of freedom of expression in Venezuela on November 20 following its most recent in-country visit. Specifically, the SIP express concern over a proposed constitutional amendment that would suppress the right to information during declared states of emergency. The organization also noted that the "accelerated deterioration" of the freedom of expression in Venezuela was a cause for concern. Gonzalo Marroquin, president of the SIP's commission on Freedom of Expression, announced that the organization still plans to hold a conference in March in Venezuela. Initial attempts by SIP to reserve venues for the event proved difficult after several hotels claimed to be booked.

Comment

¶11. (C) While it is plausible that Cadivi's failure to release dollars to import printing paper is connected to "El Correo's" anti-government editorial stance, it is also likely that the lack of payment is a sign of Cadivi's growing inefficiency and its inability to meet the high demand for dollars, particularly during the holiday season. Individuals and businesses looking to access Cadivi dollars have publicly complained about the severe backlog cause when Cadivi's internet server crashed several weeks ago. Surprisingly, pressure from "El Correo" and other international media

observer organizations prompted BRV dependencies to release the dollars. Separately, we expect the BRV to implement new measures to increase its control over the free press in the coming year following the defeat of President Chavez' effort to change the constitution. The BRV continues to decry the remaining free and independent press as a major obstacle to the implementation of Chavez' ill-defined "21st Century Socialism" project.

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